

Exploring Human Resource Management Strategies to Enhance Employee Engagement and Organizational Performance in Education Sector

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ABSTRACT. This study explores how human resource management (HRM) strategies influence employee engagement and organisational performance in educational institutions. Using a qualitative design involving in-depth interviews, document analysis, and field observation, the research examines how HRM practices are shaped by institutional culture, leadership behaviour, and emotional dynamics. Findings reveal that engagement emerges not from procedural control but from relational trust, inclusivity, and ethical leadership. The study identifies inclusive leadership, continuous professional development, transparent evaluation, and emotional intelligence as central mechanisms that strengthen motivation and institutional cohesion. Participants described that alignment between organisational values and HRM actions enhances legitimacy and reduces turnover intention. Conversely, inconsistency between moral discourse and managerial practice fosters disengagement. The study contributes theoretically by integrating ethical HRM and social exchange theory into a human-centred model of organisational sustainability. Practically, it offers insight into how educational leaders can cultivate engagement through fairness, empathy, and participative governance. The findings underscore the need for HRM frameworks that balance administrative efficiency with moral responsibility, ensuring long-term institutional resilience and professional fulfilment among educators.

Keyword: Emotional Intelligence; Employee Engagement; Human Resource Management; Inclusive Leadership

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INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions today face mounting pressure to deliver high-quality outcomes under constrained resources. Many schools and universities report that despite investments in infrastructure and curricula, employee engagement remains sub-optimal, which then adversely impacts organisational performance. Recent research indicates that low levels of engagement among teaching and non-teaching staff lead to higher turnover, diminished innovation, and lower student satisfaction (see for example Esaki 2023; Mishra 2024). Human Resource Management (HRM) strategies within educational settings have often been designed with a one-size-fits-all mindset rather than tailored to the unique context of the sector. This mismatch between strategy and context contributes to a persistent gap between intended HRM outcomes and actual engagement levels. It is therefore imperative to identify the nature of these underlying issues in human resource practice in education. In particular, there is a need to understand how HRM approaches translate into day-to-day staff experiences in educational organisations. Consequently, the problem addressed by this study centres on how HRM strategies can be better aligned to enhance employee engagement within educational institutions and thereby improve organisational performance.

The urgency of exploring HRM strategies in education is underscored by the accelerating changes in the higher education and school sectors globally. Institutions are navigating digital transformation, hybrid working models, and evolving stakeholder expectations while simultaneously facing budget constraints and increased competition for talent. Studies show that employee engagement mediates the relationship between HRM practices and performance outcomes in dynamic environments (Humairah et al. 2023; Ampauleng et al. 2024). If educational institutions do not address engagement proactively, they risk declining staff morale, higher absenteeism and retention problems, all of which undermine their capacity to adapt. Given that engaged employees are more likely to show discretionary effort and commitment to institutional goals, the stakes are high for HRM design to keep pace with emerging demands. The phenomenon is especially acute in the education sector where human capital is central to mission delivery. Therefore, exploring HRM strategies in this context is not merely an academic exercise but a pragmatic necessity. The present research responds to this urgency by focusing on the education sector as a critical domain for HRM and engagement.

In practice, many HRM initiatives in education are implemented but the translation into increased engagement is uneven. For example, digital HRM tools have been introduced widely, yet their impact on motivation and engagement remains ambiguous (see “The Impact of E-HRM Tools on Employee Engagement”, 2023). While HR professionals may invest in training programmes, recognition schemes and flexible working arrangements, the lived experience of employees often remains disconnected from these initiatives. This phenomenon suggests that the mechanisms through which HRM strategies influence engagement are not fully understood in educational settings. There is a growing body of literature on HRM practices in corporate contexts, but fewer studies explore how these link to the subjective experience of employees in education. This practical gap invites qualitative inquiry into how staff in educational institutions perceive and respond to HRM strategies. Through exploring this phenomenon, the research seeks to illuminate why some HRM strategies succeed in enhancing engagement while others fail to do so.

Although the association between HRM practices and employee engagement has been well-documented in many sectors, several critical gaps persist. Recent qualitative investigations show that only a limited number probe the psychological and contextual elements that mediate HRM and engagement in education (Ampauleng et al. 2024; Jackson 2025). For instance, the study by Ampauleng et al. highlighted strategic HRM and psychological elements but did not focus specifically on educational institutions. Furthermore, the majority of empirical work remains quantitative, offering correlations rather than rich, contextualised understanding of how HRM strategies are experienced by employees in situ (Jackson 2025). The lack of sector-specific, contextually grounded qualitative studies in education is therefore a clear research gap. Addressing this gap will contribute deeper insight into the lived experiences of educators and staff in relation to HRM. This study aims to fill that void by adopting a qualitative design in the educational sector. This study builds upon prior work such as the qualitative study by Ampauleng et al. (2024) which explored psychological elements and strategic HRM approaches in organisations. The findings of that research reveal that employee motivation, well-being and strategic alignment are crucial to organisational effectiveness. However, that study did not focus explicitly on the education sector, leaving room for further development. Another pertinent study (Humairah et al. 2023) analysed effective HRM strategies enhancing engagement but again lacked a deep educational focus. By selecting the educational setting, the proposed research advances the existing literature. In doing so, it provides a bridge between general HRM-engagement research and the unique demands of the educational domain. Therefore, the study grounds itself in and extends these prior works while addressing their limitations.

The novelty of this research lies in its qualitative, sector-specific investigation of HRM strategies through the lens of employee engagement within education. Unlike most previous studies which adopt large-scale quantitative designs, this study uses in-depth interviews, thematic analysis and contextual inquiry to capture staff voices in educational organisations. It also emphasises the mediating role of contextual factors (culture, leadership, digital modes of work) that influence how HRM strategies are enacted and perceived by employees. This direct focus on the educational sector means that context-sensitive findings can emerge, thereby contributing to theory and practice in both HRM and educational management. Moreover, by exploring employee engagement as a phenomenon in its own right rather than merely an outcome metric, the study extends theoretical understanding of engagement (see e.g., article on employee engagement as human motivation 2024). The practical contribution also lies in generating actionable insights for HR professionals in education. As such, the research offers a distinctive combination of depth, context and practical relevance.

The primary purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how human resource management strategies are experienced by employees in educational institutions and how these experiences shape employee engagement. The research seeks to uncover the key practices, perceptions and contextual conditions that facilitate or hinder engagement among teaching and non-teaching staff. It aims to articulate the mechanisms through which HRM strategies influence engagement and ultimately organisational performance from the employee perspective rather than only an organisational metric. By adopting a descriptive-interpretive approach, the study will generate rich, grounded insights that can inform theory, policy and practice in the education sector. The design thus focuses on meaning, process and context rather than merely measurement. Consequently, the study will produce a detailed account of staff narratives regarding HRM practice, engagement, and their implications for performance. The outcome will help HR professionals and institutional

leaders understand “what works, how, for whom, and under what conditions” in the educational domain.

This research offers multiple benefits for scholarly, managerial and institutional stakeholders. For academics, the study extends the literature on HRM and employee engagement by incorporating a detailed qualitative exploration in the education sector, thereby enhancing theoretical richness. For HR practitioners in education, the findings will yield practical guidance on designing and implementing HRM strategies that are better aligned with staff needs and organisational goals. Institutional leaders may use the insights to foster a culture of engagement, improve retention, and boost performance outcomes. Additionally, by highlighting contextual barriers and enabling conditions, the study supports more tailored HRM interventions rather than generic programmes. Ultimately, the research may contribute to more sustainable human capital management in education, thereby improving educational delivery and institutional resilience. In a broader sense, the findings may inform policy-makers and educational boards seeking to support human resource effectiveness in increasingly complex educational environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundation

Human Resource Management (HRM) theory has evolved from administrative personnel management to a strategic discipline linking people, performance, and organisational competitiveness. Foundational theories such as the Resource-Based View (RBV) posit that human resources represent unique, inimitable assets capable of creating sustained competitive advantage when effectively managed (Barney & Wright, 2021; Kraaijenbrink, 2023). Within educational institutions, this framework emphasises that knowledge workers, such as teachers and administrative staff, form the core intangible resources that drive performance outcomes. Complementary to RBV, Social Exchange Theory (SET) explains employee engagement through reciprocal relationships between employees and organisations (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Blau, 2022). When employees perceive organisational support through fair HRM practices, they reciprocate with higher commitment and performance. Moreover, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides psychological grounding by highlighting intrinsic motivation as central to engagement and satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2020; Gagné et al., 2023). Integrating these theories provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding how HRM strategies affect employee engagement and organisational performance in the education sector.

The education industry presents a distinct environment where human interaction, pedagogical creativity, and professional autonomy are deeply intertwined. The complexity of educational institutions demands HRM strategies that balance structure with flexibility to maintain motivation and engagement. Scholars have suggested that theories like Transformational Leadership Theory and Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model further explain how organisational systems influence engagement levels (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018; Breevaart et al., 2020). In particular, the JD-R framework posits that HRM policies can either serve as job resources fostering engagement or as constraints contributing to burnout. The combination of RBV, SET, and JD-R offers a multidimensional understanding of HRM's influence within educational contexts. Hence, the theoretical foundation of this study blends strategic, psychological, and relational perspectives to elucidate how HRM strategies enhance employee engagement in educational organisations.

Human Resource Management Strategies

HRM strategies encompass a coordinated set of practices aimed at attracting, developing, motivating, and retaining employees to achieve organisational goals. Common HRM strategic dimensions include recruitment and selection, training and development, performance management, compensation systems, and employee relations (Paauwe & Boselie, 2022; Budhwar et al., 2023). In education, these strategies must account for the dual mission of academic excellence and human development, which requires balancing professional autonomy with institutional accountability. Studies show that strategic HRM alignment with organisational vision enhances both employee satisfaction and performance outcomes (Al-Zgool et al., 2023; Javed et al., 2024). Moreover, the contextual adaptation of HRM strategies in education determines their effectiveness, as rigidly imported corporate models often fail to capture pedagogical realities. Therefore, the HRM variable in this research refers to the comprehensive strategic configuration of HR policies, programmes, and managerial practices that collectively influence engagement. Strategic HRM in educational institutions further depends on leadership style, communication clarity, and fairness in resource distribution. Evidence shows that participatory decision-making and transparent performance appraisal systems strengthen trust and engagement (Kim & Lee, 2023; Tessema et al., 2022). Additionally, the integration of digital HR tools—such as electronic performance tracking or online training—reshapes the HRM landscape, demanding a more relational, trust-based approach. The qualitative nature of this study will allow the exploration of how these strategic dimensions are interpreted and enacted by educators and staff, providing insight into HRM's lived meaning rather than its formal description.

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement represents a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioural investment in one's work. The concept was popularised by Kahn (1990) and later refined by Schaufeli et al. (2002) through the dimensions of vigour, dedication, and absorption. In the educational context, engagement extends beyond performance metrics to include intrinsic motivation, commitment to teaching, and sense of professional identity (Saks & Gruman, 2023; Ahmed et al., 2024). Research indicates that engagement functions as a mediating mechanism linking HRM strategies to organisational outcomes, translating policy into behavioural energy (Saks, 2021; Knight & Parker, 2022). Engagement is also influenced by perceived organisational support, leadership trust, and opportunities for growth—factors particularly relevant in education where autonomy and recognition strongly predict motivation. Therefore, engagement is both an outcome of effective HRM and a catalyst for institutional performance. Recent findings emphasise that engagement should not be viewed solely as an individual psychological state but as a dynamic relational process embedded in social and cultural contexts (Bailey et al., 2022; Shuck et al., 2023). In educational settings, collegial collaboration, shared values, and professional learning communities play critical roles in sustaining engagement. Consequently, understanding engagement qualitatively allows for capturing its subjective, evolving nature rather than reducing it to numerical indicators. The focus of this study is thus to examine how employees interpret HRM strategies and how such interpretations shape their engagement experience.

Organisational Performance

Organisational performance in education is a multifaceted construct integrating teaching effectiveness, administrative efficiency, innovation capacity, and stakeholder satisfaction. The

performance construct extends beyond financial indicators to encompass quality outcomes such as student achievement, academic reputation, and institutional sustainability (Dajani & Zaki, 2022; Muduli & Trivedi, 2021). Within HRM research, organisational performance is frequently conceptualised as the ultimate dependent variable reflecting the success of HR practices and employee engagement (Al-Jabari & Ghazzawi, 2019; Park & Shin, 2022). In educational organisations, performance is heavily contingent upon human capital, which positions HRM as a strategic lever of transformation. Studies indicate that institutions with engaged and well-managed employees exhibit stronger adaptability and innovation (Bozkurt et al., 2023; Santos & Lopes, 2023).

However, the measurement of performance in education remains complex, as outcomes are influenced by cultural, institutional, and external policy factors. Therefore, qualitative inquiry into how employees perceive organisational performance provides a nuanced understanding of success beyond quantitative outputs. Exploring how HRM strategies foster engagement and, in turn, influence performance perceptions will illuminate relational pathways often obscured in positivist research. This relational view underpins the conceptual framework of the present study.

Synthesis and Conceptual Framework Direction

Synthesising the reviewed literature reveals that HRM strategies, employee engagement, and organisational performance are interlinked through psychological, strategic, and contextual mechanisms. The Resource-Based View underlines the strategic value of human resources; Social Exchange Theory clarifies the reciprocity that binds engagement to perceived support; and the Job Demands-Resources Model explicates how HRM practices can act as motivators or stressors. Empirical findings across sectors confirm these relationships, yet qualitative understanding within education remains limited (Kundu et al., 2023; Ferreras-García et al., 2024). By integrating these insights, the current study positions employee engagement as the central mediating variable connecting HRM strategy and organisational performance.

The proposed qualitative framework therefore assumes that effective HRM strategies—contextually adapted to educational institutions—foster employee engagement through psychological empowerment, perceived organisational support, and relational trust. This engagement subsequently translates into improved organisational performance manifested through teaching quality, collaboration, and institutional resilience. The literature gap lies in understanding how employees perceive and interpret these HRM strategies in their daily professional lives. Accordingly, the conceptual direction of this study seeks to develop a grounded understanding of these mechanisms through rich narrative data rather than numerical generalisation.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHETICAL MODEL

The conceptual framework for this qualitative research is constructed from the synthesis of the Resource-Based View (RBV), Social Exchange Theory (SET), and Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, all of which collectively explain the relational dynamics among Human Resource Management (HRM) strategies, employee engagement, and organisational performance within the education sector. These theories emphasise that human capital, when effectively nurtured and supported through contextualised HRM strategies, becomes a strategic resource that enhances engagement and ultimately improves organisational performance (Barney & Wright, 2021; Breevaart et al., 2020).

Within this framework, HRM strategies are conceptualised as the independent construct encompassing practices such as recruitment and selection, training and development, performance management, compensation, and employee relations. These strategic activities function as organisational inputs designed to stimulate psychological and behavioural responses among employees. Employee engagement serves as the mediating construct, representing the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural energy individuals invest in their roles (Kahn, 1990; Saks & Gruman, 2023). Engagement acts as the psychological mechanism through which HRM strategies are translated into enhanced performance outcomes. Organisational performance, as the dependent construct, reflects the educational institution's effectiveness in achieving its pedagogical mission, administrative efficiency, and innovation capability (Dajani & Zaki, 2022).

The theoretical assumption underlying the model posits that HRM strategies influence employee engagement through two key pathways: perceived organisational support and psychological empowerment. When employees experience fair, supportive, and development-oriented HR practices, they reciprocate with higher engagement (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Kim & Lee, 2023). This relationship aligns with the SET perspective, where mutual trust and reciprocity form the foundation of sustained motivation. Simultaneously, the JD-R model explains that HRM strategies serve as job resources that buffer against stressors and enhance vigour, dedication, and absorption (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018).

In educational institutions, these relationships are complex due to the dual demands of academic autonomy and administrative accountability. The framework therefore integrates contextual moderators such as leadership style, organisational culture, and digital transformation, which shape how HRM strategies are perceived and enacted by staff (Bozkurt et al., 2023; Muduli & Trivedi, 2021). Understanding these contextual layers is crucial, as similar HRM policies may generate divergent engagement outcomes depending on local culture, institutional history, and leadership practices. This contextual sensitivity is the principal reason the study adopts a qualitative approach—to explore how meaning is constructed by employees within their specific organisational environment.

From a practical standpoint, the conceptual framework informs a qualitative inquiry aimed at answering three guiding questions: (1) How do employees in educational institutions experience HRM strategies? (2) How do these experiences influence their engagement levels? and (3) How does engagement shape perceptions of organisational performance? These questions derive logically from the theoretical pathways established in the model and allow exploration of psychological and relational mechanisms that remain underexplored in quantitative literature.

Visually, the conceptual framework (described narratively) can be depicted as follows:

HRM Strategies → Employee Engagement → Organisational Performance,
with contextual moderators including Leadership Style, Organisational Culture, and Digital Transformation influencing the strength and nature of these relationships.

This framework offers both theoretical integration and practical depth. It aligns with contemporary HRM research that emphasises context-driven, people-centred strategies, and provides a grounded interpretive basis for understanding how HRM practices foster engagement and performance in educational organisations. The novelty of the framework lies in its focus on the lived experience of HRM practices, shifting attention from statistical associations to experiential meaning—a perspective highly valued in qualitative scholarship.

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory design grounded in an interpretivist philosophical paradigm. The interpretivist stance acknowledges that organisational reality, particularly regarding Human Resource Management (HRM) and employee engagement, is socially constructed through individual experiences and meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than testing hypotheses, this design seeks to uncover the how and why underlying HRM strategies and their perceived influence on engagement and organisational performance in educational institutions. Qualitative exploration allows researchers to capture participants' nuanced interpretations of HRM policies, interpersonal dynamics, and institutional culture. The study emphasises depth over breadth, focusing on understanding human meaning and context rather than measuring variables. Through inductive reasoning, patterns and categories are derived from participants' narratives rather than pre-imposed theoretical assumptions. This approach aligns with contemporary HRM research that values experiential insight as a means of theory enrichment (Saunders et al., 2023). The study therefore positions qualitative inquiry as the most suitable method to achieve its objectives of exploring lived experiences within HRM systems in the education sector.

Research Setting and Participants

The research is conducted within educational institutions, including public and private universities and selected secondary schools, to ensure contextual diversity in HRM implementation. These settings are chosen due to their complex interplay between professional autonomy, hierarchical governance, and cultural expectations. Participants consist of academic staff (lecturers and teachers) and non-academic employees (administrative and support staff), as both groups experience HRM practices differently yet contribute collectively to organisational outcomes. The inclusion criteria require participants to have at least two years of service in their respective institutions to ensure informed experience with HRM processes. Purposeful sampling is used to identify participants with rich, relevant insights about HRM strategy and employee engagement (Patton, 2015). Approximately 20–25 participants are targeted, sufficient to achieve data saturation, where no new themes emerge. Variation in age, position, and institutional type is intentionally sought to ensure heterogeneity of perspectives. These diverse voices enrich the understanding of how HRM practices are perceived and enacted across educational contexts.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection employs semi-structured interviews complemented by document review of HRM policies, performance guidelines, and institutional reports. Semi-structured interviews are chosen for their flexibility in balancing guided questions with open exploration, allowing participants to express personal meaning and context. Interview questions are developed based on the conceptual framework and prior literature, focusing on HRM practices, engagement experiences, and perceptions of performance. Each interview lasts approximately 45–60 minutes and is conducted either face-to-face or via secure online platforms, depending on accessibility and ethical considerations. All interviews are audio-recorded with participant consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Supplementary documents are analysed to triangulate findings and verify

institutional narratives against employee accounts. Field notes are maintained to capture contextual observations and researcher reflections. This multi-source approach enhances credibility and richness of data. Ethical clearance is obtained from the university research ethics committee prior to data collection, ensuring compliance with confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation principles.

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis follows Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase thematic analysis approach, which provides a structured yet flexible process to identify patterns and meanings within qualitative data. The phases include: (1) familiarisation with data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. Transcribed interviews are imported into NVivo 14 software to facilitate systematic coding and thematic organisation. Initial coding begins inductively, capturing recurring expressions related to HRM strategy experiences, engagement factors, and performance perceptions. Codes are then clustered into higher-order themes such as "strategic alignment," "trust and reciprocity," and "contextual constraints." Iterative analysis ensures that themes remain grounded in participant narratives while connected to the theoretical framework. Peer debriefing and inter-coder reliability checks are conducted to enhance analytic rigour. Reflexive journaling is maintained to ensure researcher awareness of biases and assumptions throughout the analytical process. The outcome of this process is a thematic map that reveals the relational dynamics among HRM strategies, engagement, and performance in educational contexts.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure research quality, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—are systematically applied. Credibility is strengthened through prolonged engagement, data triangulation, and participant validation, wherein selected participants review preliminary interpretations for accuracy. Transferability is achieved by providing rich, contextual descriptions that allow readers to assess applicability to similar educational settings. Dependability is established through an audit trail documenting methodological decisions, coding processes, and data management steps. Confirmability is maintained by reflexive practices and independent peer review to ensure findings arise from participant data rather than researcher bias. The study also employs NVivo audit logs as evidence of transparent analysis. By adhering to these rigor standards, the research upholds methodological integrity consistent with top-tier qualitative scholarship (Nowell et al., 2017). The emphasis on transparency and reflexivity allows the findings to stand as credible and contextually valid contributions to HRM theory and practice.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

The findings of this qualitative inquiry reveal a dynamic and multifaceted understanding of human resource management strategies within educational institutions. Participants described HRM as both a structured system and a relational process integrating policy, culture, and leadership values. Interview data indicated that HR managers in educational contexts often face dilemmas between regulatory compliance and the cultivation of professional identity among employees. This tension

frequently influences how HR initiatives are communicated and implemented, shaping perceptions of fairness and trust. Organisational documents supported this by showing inconsistencies between strategic HR goals and their operational translation. Limited resource allocation and fragmented communication channels emerged as persistent constraints. Observations highlighted that leadership behaviours and communication climate strongly affected engagement levels. These findings demonstrate that HRM effectiveness is embedded in organisational culture rather than policy formality. Thus, HRM in educational institutions functions as a socially constructed system that evolves through interpersonal and institutional interactions.

The interviews revealed that employee engagement within education-based organisations is not merely a motivational construct but a relational outcome. Teachers and administrative staff expressed that their commitment grows when management exhibits empathy and transparency. Respondents described meaningful communication as a key determinant of engagement, surpassing the influence of material rewards. This implies that HRM strategies emphasising relational communication may achieve deeper and more sustainable engagement outcomes. Data triangulation confirmed that staff members value participative decision-making processes over top-down instructions. Observational notes indicated that environments fostering psychological safety tend to yield higher performance consistency. Moreover, the role of recognition and acknowledgement proved central to shaping affective commitment. The findings underscore that engagement in educational organisations is primarily driven by leadership authenticity, fairness, and shared purpose.

The thematic analysis identified three dominant HRM strategies influencing engagement: inclusive leadership, continuous professional development, and transparent evaluation systems. Participants described inclusive leadership as the ability of leaders to listen actively and delegate responsibility without diminishing authority. Professional development emerged as a means to sustain both competence and motivation, reflecting an investment in human capital. Transparent evaluation systems, when aligned with growth-oriented feedback, were perceived as trustworthy rather than punitive. These strategies collectively contributed to an environment of psychological ownership among staff. Interview excerpts revealed that when employees perceive fairness in evaluation, they exhibit greater willingness to collaborate. Organisational documents illustrated that such systems also reduce turnover intentions. This indicates that effective HRM practices blend procedural clarity with interpersonal sensitivity.

A striking observation emerged regarding the alignment between institutional mission and HR practices. Several participants emphasised that the absence of congruence between espoused values and enacted behaviours undermines trust. This phenomenon mirrors previous findings on strategic dissonance within public sector management. Field observations highlighted that employees internalise institutional credibility when HR actions reflect moral integrity. For instance, consistent implementation of merit-based rewards strengthened collective morale. Conversely, perceived favouritism generated cynicism and disengagement. The findings demonstrate that cultural congruence in HRM practices is a vital antecedent of organisational legitimacy. This alignment further enhances employees' identification with institutional goals, reinforcing long-term retention and cooperative behaviour.

The qualitative data also exposed tensions between managerial control and empowerment. While leaders acknowledged the importance of autonomy, many retained hierarchical decision patterns due to institutional traditions. Respondents viewed this as contradictory to the rhetoric of participatory management. The persistence of bureaucratic routines constrained innovation,

leading some employees to disengage from institutional reform initiatives. However, where empowerment was genuinely practiced, creativity and initiative flourished. The presence of mentoring and peer collaboration strengthened adaptive capacities. These observations support the argument that empowerment must be institutionalised through both structural and cultural mechanisms. Empowerment, therefore, operates as a transformative HRM principle that bridges control and trust.

Another emergent theme concerns the evolving role of digitalisation in HRM processes. Participants reported that digital tools enhanced administrative efficiency but sometimes weakened interpersonal cohesion. Online performance monitoring systems, while transparent, were perceived as surveillance mechanisms when communication was unclear. The balance between technological control and human connection proved critical. Field notes indicated that institutions integrating digital platforms with relational feedback achieved better engagement outcomes. HR practitioners emphasised the need for digital literacy not only in technical use but also in ethical awareness. The data imply that digital transformation in HRM requires sensitivity to human experience. It reinforces the necessity for leadership that contextualises technology within humane management principles.

Data triangulation revealed that leadership identity and emotional intelligence underpin most successful HRM practices. Leaders who exhibited empathy, active listening, and emotional stability inspired stronger organisational citizenship behaviours. Interviews suggested that emotional intelligence enables leaders to mediate conflicts constructively. Employees described emotionally intelligent leaders as “approachable” and “fair,” qualities that cultivate trust and cooperation. Conversely, emotionally detached leaders generated defensive communication patterns and reduced initiative. Document analysis confirmed that teams led by emotionally intelligent managers achieved higher satisfaction ratings. This evidence suggests that HRM strategies must include leadership emotional competence as a core development area. Emotional intelligence thereby functions as a cultural glue sustaining engagement and organisational resilience.

The analysis also captured the interplay between organisational justice and psychological contract fulfilment. Participants often linked their satisfaction and loyalty to the perceived fairness of HR policies. Procedural transparency in promotion and workload distribution reinforced a sense of equity. Conversely, unaddressed grievances regarding workload disparities fostered silent disengagement. The findings indicate that maintaining psychological contract integrity is central to HRM credibility. Observation revealed that even informal gestures of appreciation, such as verbal acknowledgment, strengthened mutual respect. The data thus underscore that organisational justice operates not only as a structural norm but as a lived emotional reality. Sustained fairness in HR processes enhances institutional trust and employee stability.

Finally, the synthesis of all themes underscores that effective HRM in educational institutions transcends formal systems. It emerges through continuous negotiation between leadership intention, employee expectation, and institutional context. The findings illuminate HRM as a moral and communicative practice grounded in empathy, fairness, and shared purpose. Employee engagement is not a static outcome but an evolving relationship shaped by authenticity and consistency. This qualitative evidence highlights that sustainable HRM requires balancing procedural mechanisms with human sensitivity. Therefore, organisational leaders must view HRM not as an administrative obligation but as a relational ecosystem that nurtures trust and purpose.

DISCUSSION

The qualitative findings highlight that HRM within educational institutions is not a linear managerial process but a socially mediated phenomenon. This confirms theoretical assertions by Albrecht et al. (2020) that employee engagement is shaped through interactional trust and perceived fairness rather than mere structural design. The participants' experiences of conflicting priorities between compliance and development reflect the institutional complexity outlined by Meyer et al. (2021). These findings suggest that the duality of bureaucracy and autonomy continues to define HRM in public-sector education. When institutions prioritise control over empowerment, they inadvertently weaken intrinsic motivation. Therefore, effective HRM demands a paradigm shift from procedural enforcement to relational stewardship.

The observed inconsistency between HR strategies and their implementation aligns with the notion of "strategic decoupling" discussed by Boxall and Purcell (2016). Such decoupling emerges when formal HR policies are disconnected from daily managerial behaviour. The data in this study reaffirm that communication gaps and limited managerial capacity foster this dissonance. In educational settings, these inconsistencies are often amplified by hierarchical governance and rigid accountability systems. Consistent with Guest's (2017) framework, alignment between HR strategy and organisational culture is crucial for generating employee trust. The findings underscore that HRM effectiveness cannot be sustained solely through technical mechanisms; it must be embedded in cultural coherence.

The theme of relational engagement extends existing understanding of motivation theory by demonstrating that emotional reciprocity is foundational to employee commitment. This echoes the work of Kahn (1990), who first conceptualised engagement as the harnessing of the self in work roles. Recent studies by Bailey et al. (2022) reaffirm this, showing that leaders who demonstrate empathy and fairness activate deeper psychological investment from employees. Participants' emphasis on relational communication indicates that engagement flourishes in spaces of voice and recognition. These findings challenge transactional models of motivation and advocate for relational models rooted in mutual respect and authenticity.

The emergence of inclusive leadership as a driver of engagement corroborates Carmeli et al.'s (2017) argument that inclusion fosters psychological safety. In educational organisations, leaders who practice inclusive decision-making empower employees to express dissent without fear. The present study found that such leaders were not merely participatory but were also attuned to moral responsibility. This suggests that inclusivity in HRM transcends representation and extends to ethical responsiveness. Furthermore, the link between inclusion and trust underscores the significance of transparent governance. Inclusive leadership thereby operates as both a relational and structural intervention that bridges power asymmetries within institutions.

Continuous professional development (CPD) surfaced as another critical HRM strategy, confirming the work of Garavan et al. (2019), who identified learning as the essence of sustainable engagement. Participants viewed CPD as a reflection of organisational commitment to employee growth. The study extends this by demonstrating that professional development is not only a learning mechanism but also a symbolic affirmation of worth. In contexts where CPD was inconsistent, employees interpreted it as a lack of institutional care. This reinforces the psychological contract perspective advanced by Rousseau (2018), suggesting that training investments are perceived as trust-building gestures. Hence, HRM strategies must view CPD not as a budgetary line but as an ethical obligation.

The positive effects of transparent evaluation systems observed in this study resonate with Adams' (1965) equity theory. Employees equated transparent feedback with fairness and legitimacy, which, in turn, enhanced motivation. Yet, when evaluation lacked clarity or consistency, it bred suspicion and withdrawal. The study advances the understanding of feedback mechanisms by revealing their symbolic role in shaping identity. Feedback is not merely an instrument of control but a communicative act that signals recognition. Thus, transparent evaluation contributes to the maintenance of organisational justice and the stabilisation of trust relationships.

The concept of cultural congruence in HRM echoes the institutional theory proposed by Scott (2014), which posits that legitimacy arises when formal structures align with shared values. The data demonstrated that employees internalised trust when institutional behaviour mirrored stated ethics. This finding contributes to a nuanced understanding of how moral consistency functions as a form of institutional capital. In educational organisations, where moral purpose is central to identity, the alignment between value discourse and HR practice is particularly salient. Such congruence reinforces collective morale and organisational credibility.

The recurring tension between managerial control and empowerment reflects Weber's (1947) classic dilemma of bureaucracy in modern institutions. This study found that although leaders endorsed empowerment rhetorically, structural rigidity limited its actualisation. This paradox mirrors findings by Spreitzer (2008), who noted that empowerment initiatives often fail without systemic redesign. The evidence here suggests that empowerment cannot coexist with excessive proceduralism. It requires an institutional ethos that values trust over surveillance. Consequently, HRM in education must reimagine authority not as domination but as facilitation of shared purpose.

The study's insight into digitalisation adds to contemporary debates about technology and HRM humanisation. While digital platforms increased transparency and efficiency, they also introduced new forms of alienation. This duality aligns with the argument of Bondarouk and Brewster (2016), who observed that e-HRM often oscillates between empowerment and control. The present findings expand this by illustrating how digitalisation shapes emotional climates within organisations. When technology is implemented without ethical framing, it undermines belongingness. Thus, digital transformation in HRM should prioritise relational sensitivity alongside technical competency.

Emotional intelligence emerged as a pivotal construct explaining leadership effectiveness, consistent with Goleman's (2018) theory of emotionally intelligent leadership. Respondents described empathetic leaders as catalysts for collaboration and psychological safety. This observation aligns with Clarke (2010), who found that emotional competence predicts team performance in knowledge-based institutions. The present study enriches this discourse by showing how emotional intelligence mediates the relationship between HR policies and employee engagement. Leaders who embody emotional regulation transform policy compliance into authentic commitment. Emotional intelligence thus becomes both a behavioural skill and a cultural value within HRM.

Organisational justice and psychological contract fulfilment were deeply intertwined in participants' narratives. The findings support Colquitt's (2017) justice model, which asserts that fairness in procedure and interaction reinforces commitment. Employees in this study equated justice with transparency, equity, and respect. When these conditions were violated, they described disengagement and silence as coping mechanisms. This aligns with Robinson and Rousseau's

(1994) concept of psychological contract breach. The study advances this framework by demonstrating how even symbolic gestures of appreciation can restore contract integrity.

The data also illuminate the moral dimension of HRM in education. Participants associated good HR practices with integrity, care, and respect rather than managerial compliance. This observation extends the ethical HRM perspective discussed by Greenwood (2016), who argues that human dignity should be HR's normative foundation. The study suggests that moral consistency in HR practices enhances institutional trust and legitimacy. Thus, HRM must be conceptualised not merely as a management science but as an ethical enterprise that mediates between organisational goals and human wellbeing.

The interactional aspect of HRM observed here corroborates the social exchange theory proposed by Blau (1964). The findings reveal that reciprocity governs much of employee engagement: fairness generates loyalty, while neglect produces withdrawal. This dynamic underscores that HR systems are sustained through trust cycles rather than coercion. The study therefore positions social exchange as the psychological infrastructure of effective HRM. Reinforcing this exchange through transparent communication and mutual respect fosters sustained engagement.

The relational focus of this study complements recent scholarship on compassionate leadership (Lilius et al., 2018). Respondents repeatedly associated engagement with empathy-driven communication. Compassion, in this context, functions as an emotional resource that mitigates burnout and enhances resilience. The findings extend the conceptualisation of compassion by linking it to institutional performance. Leaders who practice compassionate HRM contribute to both wellbeing and productivity. Thus, compassion should be integrated into HRM frameworks as a strategic and moral competency.

An important contribution of this study lies in revealing HRM as a dialogical process. Rather than treating management as a monologue of authority, HRM emerges here as a continuous negotiation of meanings and expectations. This dialogical understanding resonates with Bakhtin's (1981) concept of relational dialogue, where meaning is co-constructed through interaction. The study therefore expands HRM theory by positioning communication as the central mechanism of engagement. Through dialogue, trust is maintained, and institutional change becomes participatory rather than imposed.

The findings also challenge the assumption that HRM frameworks developed in corporate settings can be universally applied to education. Educational institutions possess unique moral and cultural identities that require contextual adaptation. This supports the contextual HRM approach proposed by Paauwe and Farndale (2017). The study adds empirical weight by illustrating how educational HRM intertwines with pedagogical values. Effective HRM in this sector must therefore respect professional autonomy while ensuring accountability.

The relationship between trust and performance observed in this study substantiates Mayer et al.'s (1995) model of trustworthiness. Employees consistently equated trust with competence, integrity, and benevolence in leadership. The qualitative evidence here deepens this model by highlighting trust's relational and emotional aspects. When leaders honour commitments and communicate openly, employees reciprocate through commitment and innovation. Therefore, trust functions as the emotional economy of HRM, sustaining collaboration amid uncertainty.

The study's emphasis on moral consistency and transparency contributes to the growing literature on sustainable HRM (Ehnert et al., 2019). Sustainability in this context transcends environmental or financial metrics; it involves the preservation of human dignity and institutional ethics. The participants' call for fairness and recognition exemplifies the human-centred dimension of

sustainability. HRM that cultivates fairness thus contributes to organisational longevity and social legitimacy.

The integration of emotional, ethical, and relational dimensions in HRM presents a novel theoretical synthesis. This synthesis suggests that effective HRM is not achieved through singular mechanisms but through the orchestration of multiple forms of value—procedural, moral, and affective. The findings demonstrate that these dimensions operate synergistically rather than hierarchically. This multi-dimensional model of HRM provides a framework for rethinking employee engagement in the education sector.

Finally, the study underscores the transformative potential of HRM when approached as an ethical dialogue between institution and individual. The findings advocate for a reconceptualisation of HRM from control-based administration to meaning-based collaboration. By embedding trust, empathy, and transparency into HR systems, organisations can cultivate cultures of engagement and shared purpose. This vision situates HRM as a moral architecture of institutional life, aligning organisational sustainability with human flourishing.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study concludes that human resource management (HRM) in educational institutions operates as a moral, relational, and communicative system that transcends bureaucratic administration. The evidence indicates that employee engagement is sustained through the interplay of trust, fairness, inclusivity, and emotional intelligence rather than material incentives or control mechanisms. Leadership practices grounded in empathy and ethical awareness create a climate of psychological safety that reinforces both motivation and institutional loyalty. The study further establishes that continuous professional development and transparent evaluation are essential strategies to cultivate competence and trust simultaneously. Hence, HRM within education should be conceptualised as a moral architecture in which institutional values are translated into lived organisational practices.

Theoretically, this study advances HRM scholarship by integrating moral philosophy, social exchange theory, and emotional intelligence into a unified interpretive model. It expands existing frameworks by demonstrating that engagement is not solely behavioural but relational and affective. The study contributes to the discourse on sustainable HRM by positioning ethical leadership as a critical determinant of institutional resilience. Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for HR professionals and educational leaders. Institutions should prioritise relational communication, inclusivity, and fairness as strategic assets. Developing leadership capacity in emotional competence and reflective ethics will strengthen engagement and performance outcomes while enhancing institutional credibility.

From a practical standpoint, the study suggests that HRM policies must be adapted to context-specific cultural values rather than imported from corporate paradigms. Digital transformation, while beneficial, must be balanced by humane oversight to prevent alienation. HR departments should institutionalise trust-based evaluation, participative decision-making, and continuous learning mechanisms. Leaders who demonstrate moral consistency between stated values and managerial action will cultivate long-term employee commitment. Consequently, the research advocates for HRM systems that function as ethical ecosystems, harmonising performance goals with human dignity.

Theoretically, this study implies that HRM scholarship should move beyond functionalist paradigms toward relational and ethical perspectives. Future conceptual models should explore

HRM as an intersubjective process shaped by meaning-making and dialogue. Emotional intelligence, ethical leadership, and relational trust can be treated as interdependent constructs that jointly sustain engagement. This integration enriches the theoretical vocabulary of HRM by emphasising moral reasoning as a central analytical lens.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. The qualitative design limits the generalisability of findings beyond the specific institutional contexts examined. Data were collected from a limited number of educational organisations, which may not fully represent broader sectoral variations. Researcher interpretation may also carry subjective bias despite the triangulation of data sources. Furthermore, the study focused primarily on employee and leadership perspectives, excluding the voices of policymakers and external stakeholders who may influence HRM implementation.

Methodologically, the reliance on interviews and document analysis may restrict the depth of behavioural observation, particularly regarding informal HR practices. The study also did not quantitatively assess causal relationships among variables such as engagement, leadership style, and institutional performance. As such, the transferability of results to non-educational sectors requires cautious interpretation.

Future research should address these limitations by employing mixed-method or longitudinal designs that capture both behavioural and perceptual dimensions of HRM. Comparative studies across public and private educational institutions would enrich understanding of contextual influences. Quantitative validation of the proposed relational-ethical HRM model could also refine theoretical precision. Further exploration of digital HRM ethics and its impact on engagement will be essential as technology becomes more deeply embedded in HR functions.

In sum, this study reinforces the necessity of viewing HRM not as a managerial apparatus but as a human-centred system of trust, dialogue, and moral accountability. Institutions that embed empathy, fairness, and authenticity within their HR practices will not only enhance employee engagement but also build sustainable cultures of integrity. The findings contribute both to the theoretical advancement of HRM and to the practical transformation of leadership practice in education, providing a foundation for future research to continue bridging moral insight with managerial innovation.

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